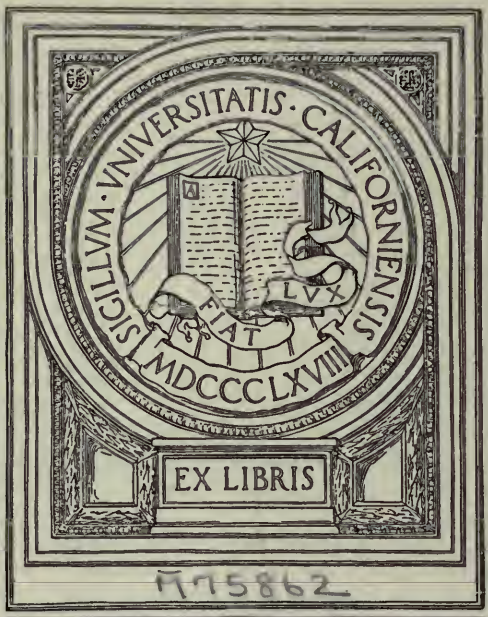
A FOREST HYMN

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A
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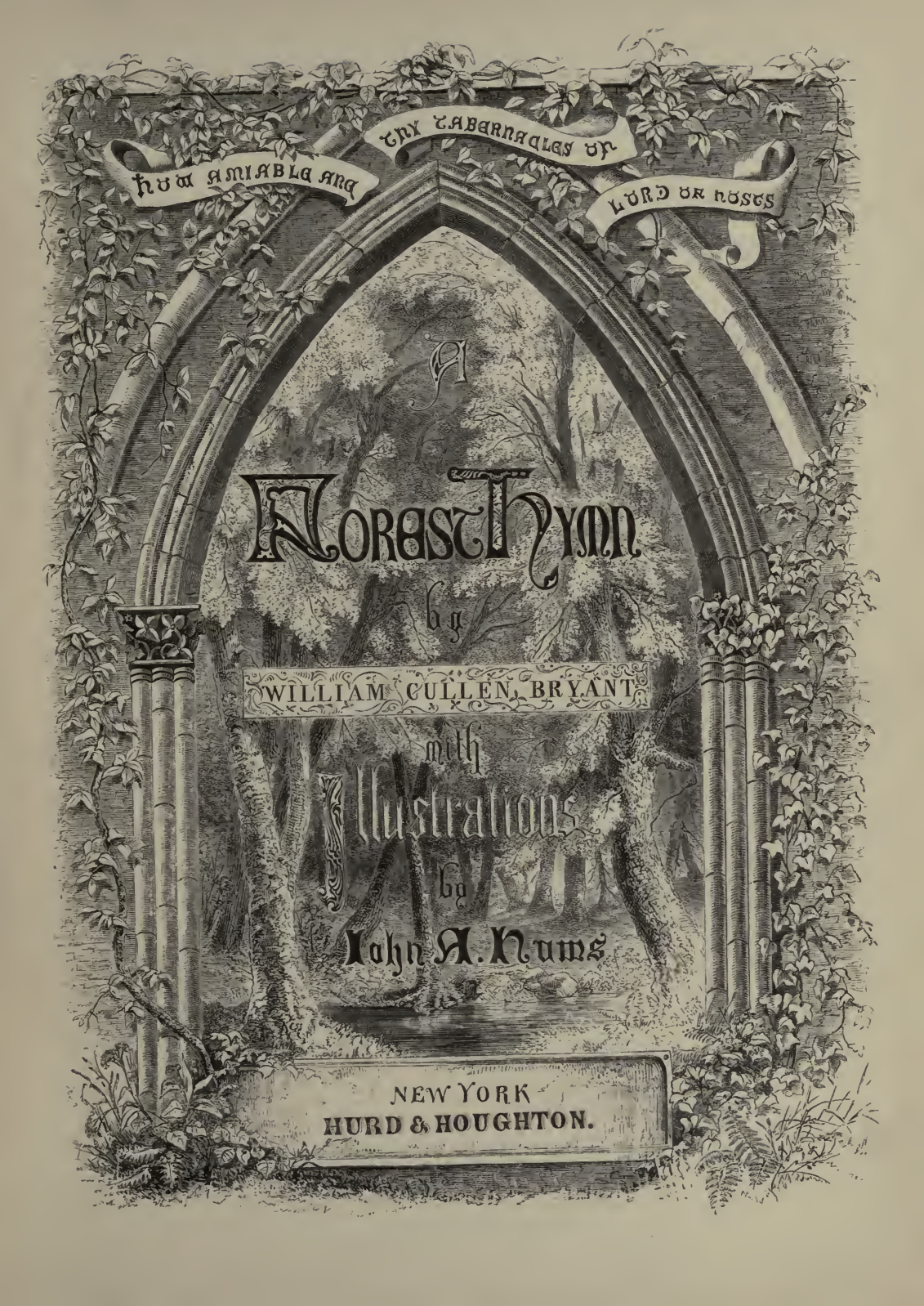
HOW AMIABLE ARE THY TABERNACLES O LORD OF HOSTS
A
FOREST HYMN
BY
WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT
WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
JOHN A. NUMS
NEW YORK
HURD & HOUGHTON.

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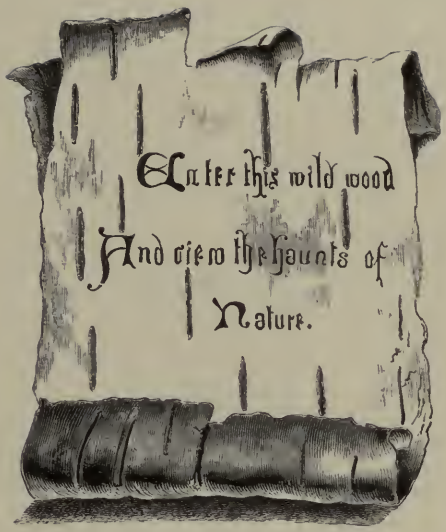
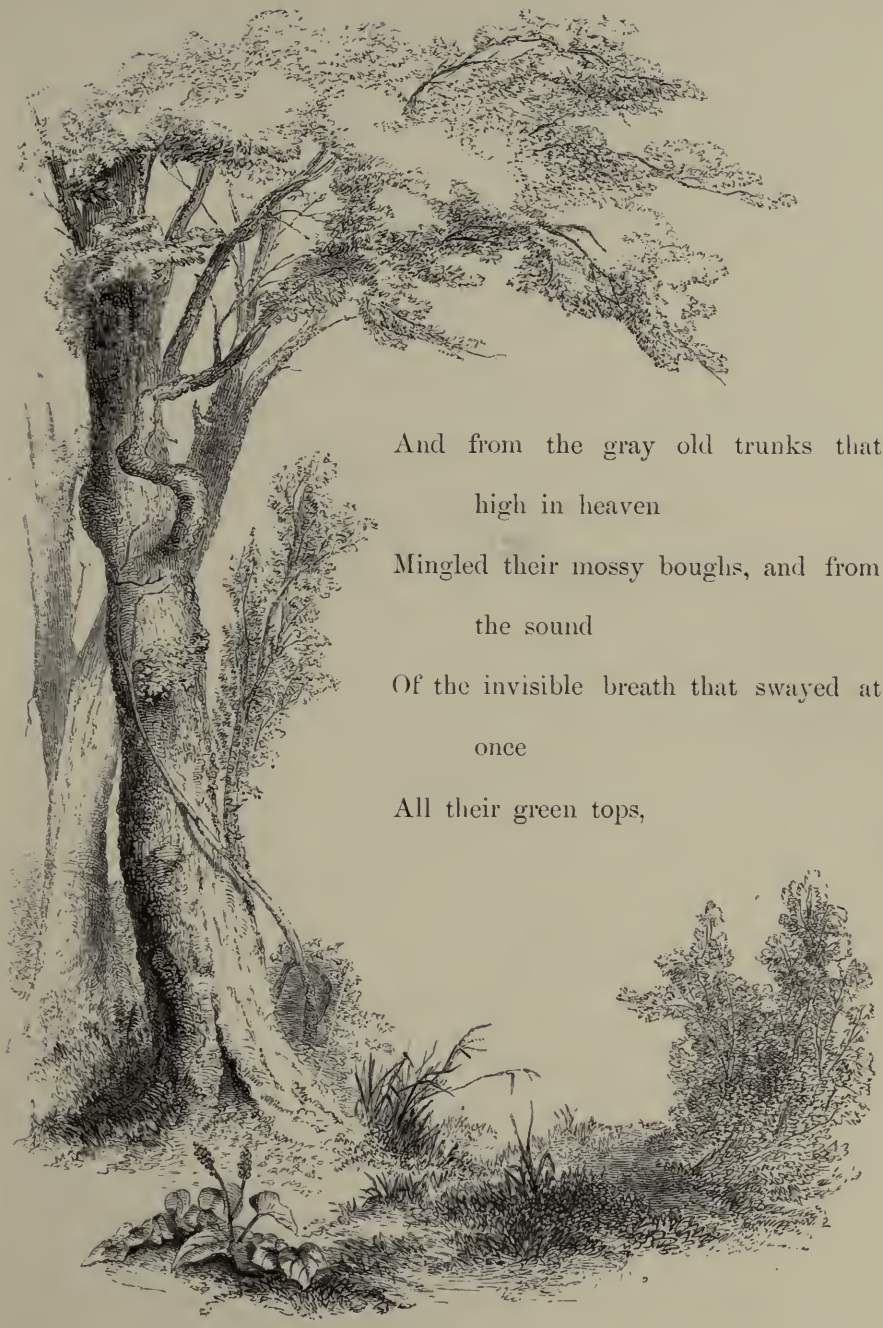

Enter this wild wood
And view the haunts of
Nature.

groves were God's first temples. Ere man learned
To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,
And spread the roof above them,—ere he framed
The lofty vault, to gather and roll back
The sound of anthems; in the darkling wood,
Amidst the cool and silence, he knelt down,
And offered to the Mightiest solemn thanks

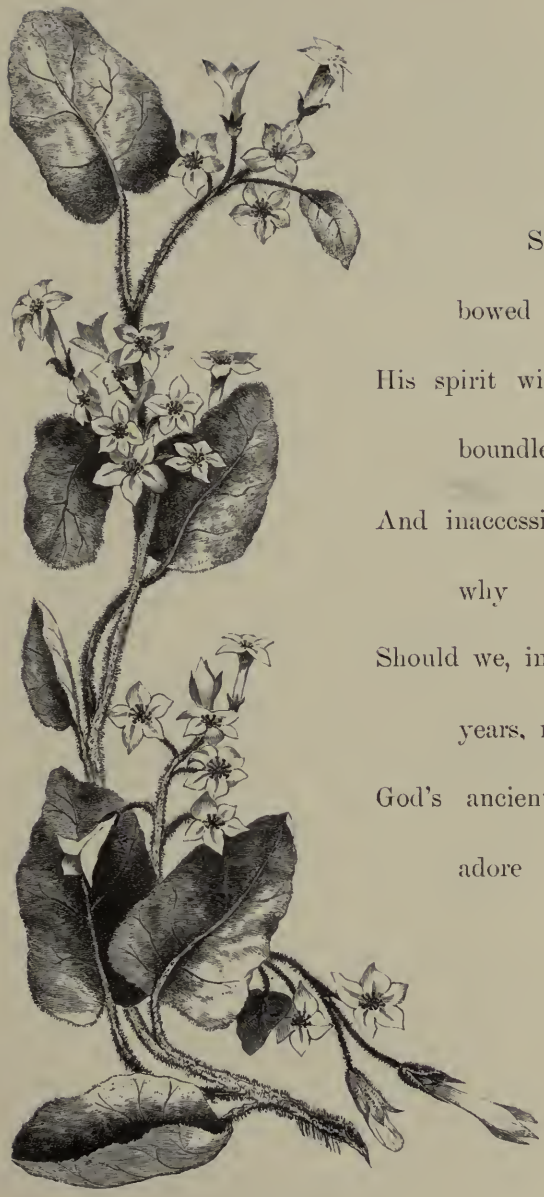
And supplication. For his simple heart

Might not resist the sacred influences,

Which, from the stilly twilight of the place,



And from the gray old trunks that high in heaven
Mingled their mossy boughs, and from the sound
Of the invisible breath that swayed at once
All their green tops,



Stole over him, and
bowed
His spirit with the thought of
boundless power
And inaccessible majesty. Ah,
why
Should we, in the world's riper
years, neglect
God's ancient sanctuaries, and
adore

Only among the crowd, and under roofs

That our frail hands have raised?

Let me, at least,

Here, in the shadow of this aged wood,

Offer one hymn—thrice happy, if it find

Acceptance in His ear.

Father, thy hand

Hath reared these venerable columns, thou

Didst weave this verdant roof.

Thou didst look down
Upon the naked earth, and, forthwith, rose
All these fair ranks of trees. They, in thy sun,
Budded, and shook their green leaves in the breeze,
And shot towards heaven.

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The century-living crow,
Whose birth was in their tops, grew old and died
Among their branches, till, at last, they stood,
As now they stand, massy, and tall, and dark,
Fit shrine for humble worshipper to hold
Communion with his Maker.

These dim vaults,

These winding aisles,

Of human pomp or pride
Report not. No fantastic carvings show
The boast of our vain race to change the
form
Of thy fair works.

But thou art here—thou fill'st
The solitude. Thou art in the soft winds
That run along the summit of these trees
In music; thou art in the cooler breath
That from the inmost darkness of the place
Comes, scarcely felt;

The barky trunks, the ground,
The fresh moist
ground,
Are all
instinct
With thee.

Here is continual worship;—nature, here,

In the tranquillity that thou dost love,

Enjoys thy presence.

Noiselessly, around,

From perch to perch, the solitary bird

Passes: and yon clear spring, that, midst its herbs,

Wells softly forth and wandering steeps the roots

Of half the mighty forest, tells no tale
Of all the good it
does.

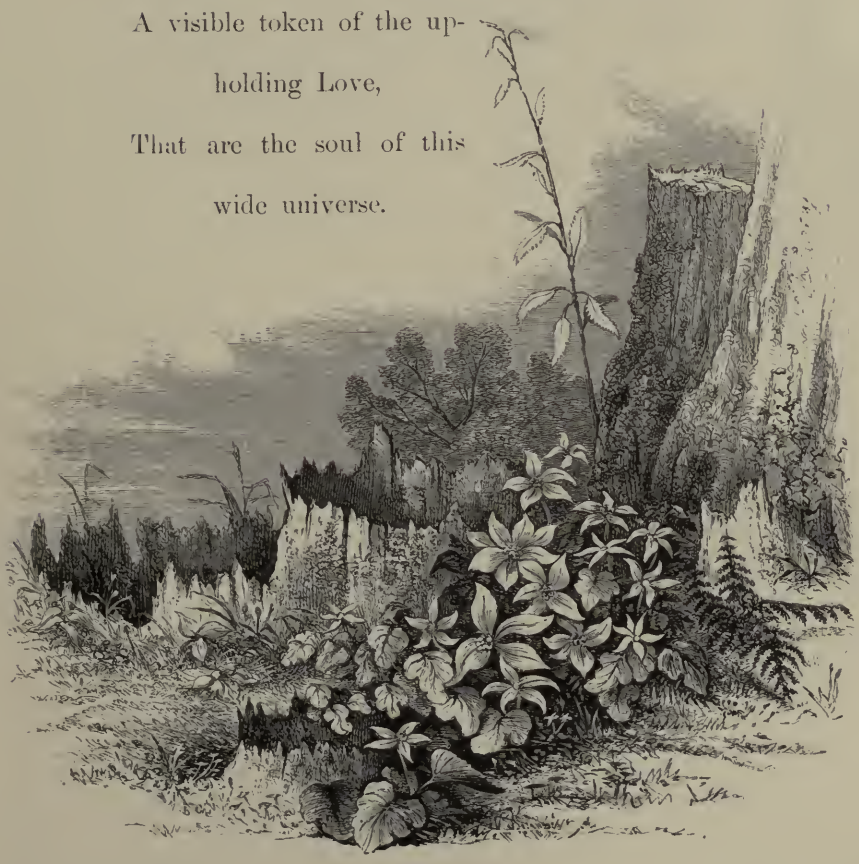
Thou hast not left

Thyself without a witness, in these shades,

Of thy perfections.

Grandeur, strength, and grace
Are here to speak of thee. This mighty oak—
By whose immovable stem I stand and seem
Almost annihilated—not a prince,
In all that proud old world beyond the deep,
E'er wore his crown as loftily as he
Wears the green coronal of leaves with which
Thy hand has graced him.

Nestled at his root
Is beauty, such as blooms not in the glare
Of the broad sun. That delicate forest flower
With scented breath, and look so like a smile,
Seems, as it issues from the shapeless mould,
An emanation of the indwelling Life,
A visible token of the up-
holding Love,
That are the soul of this
wide universe.



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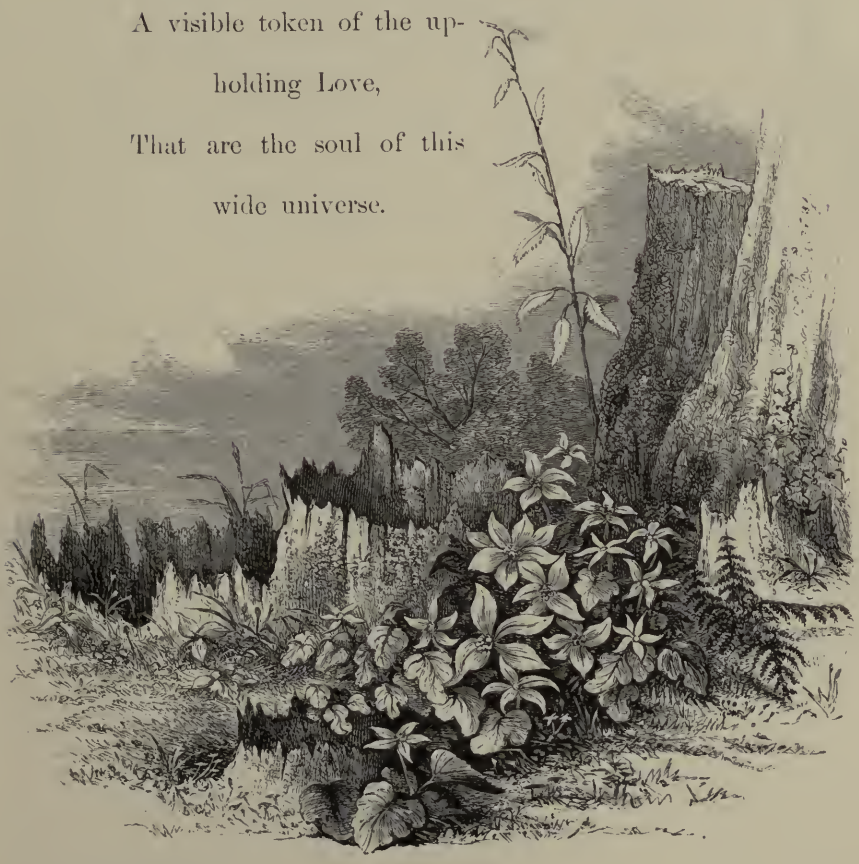
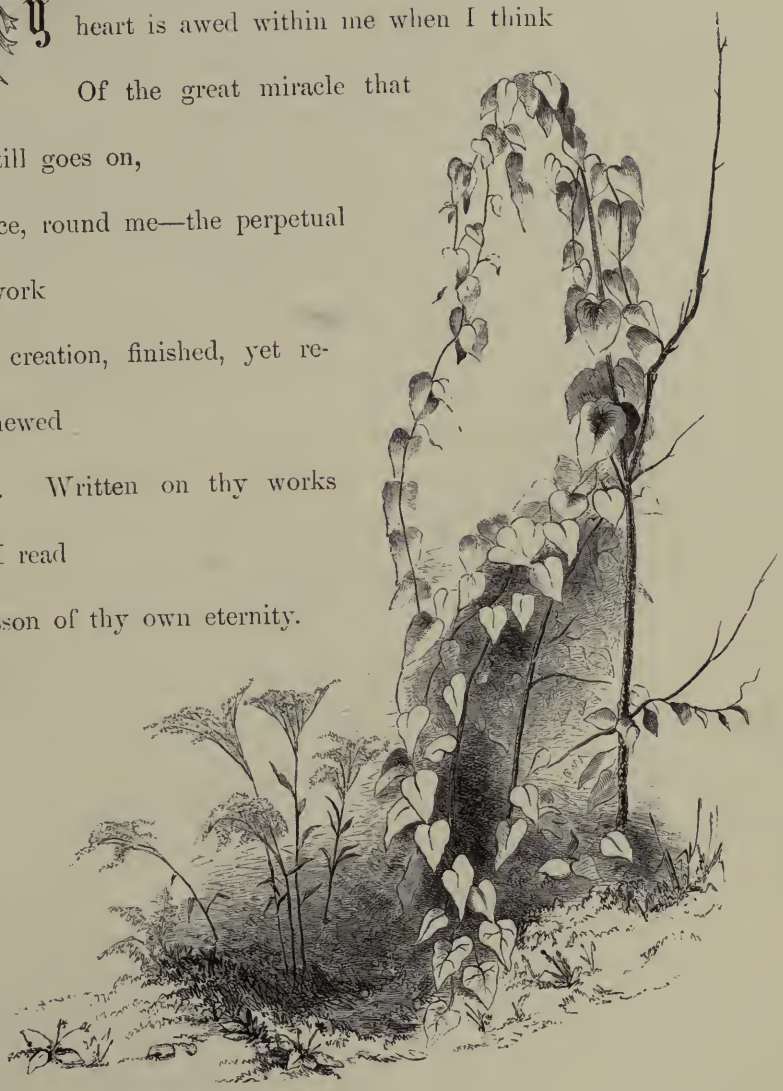
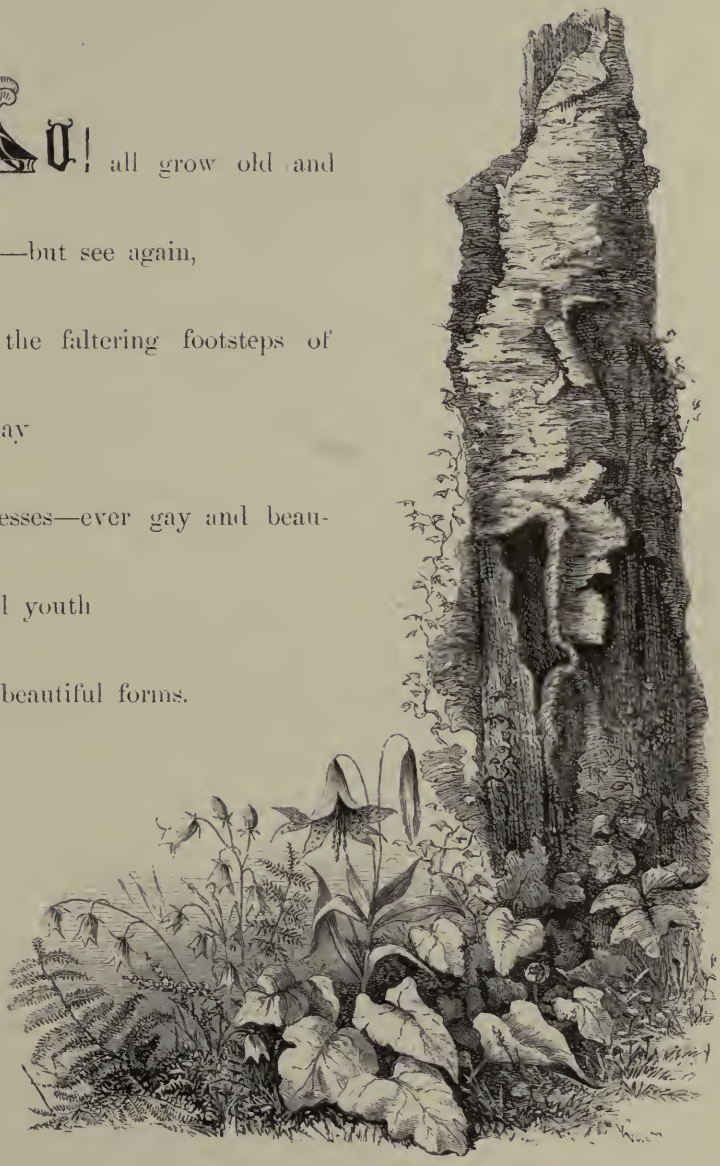


My heart is awed within me when I think
Of the great miracle that still goes on,
In silence, round me—the perpetual work
Of thy creation, finished, yet renewed
Forever. Written on thy works I read
The lesson of thy own eternity.



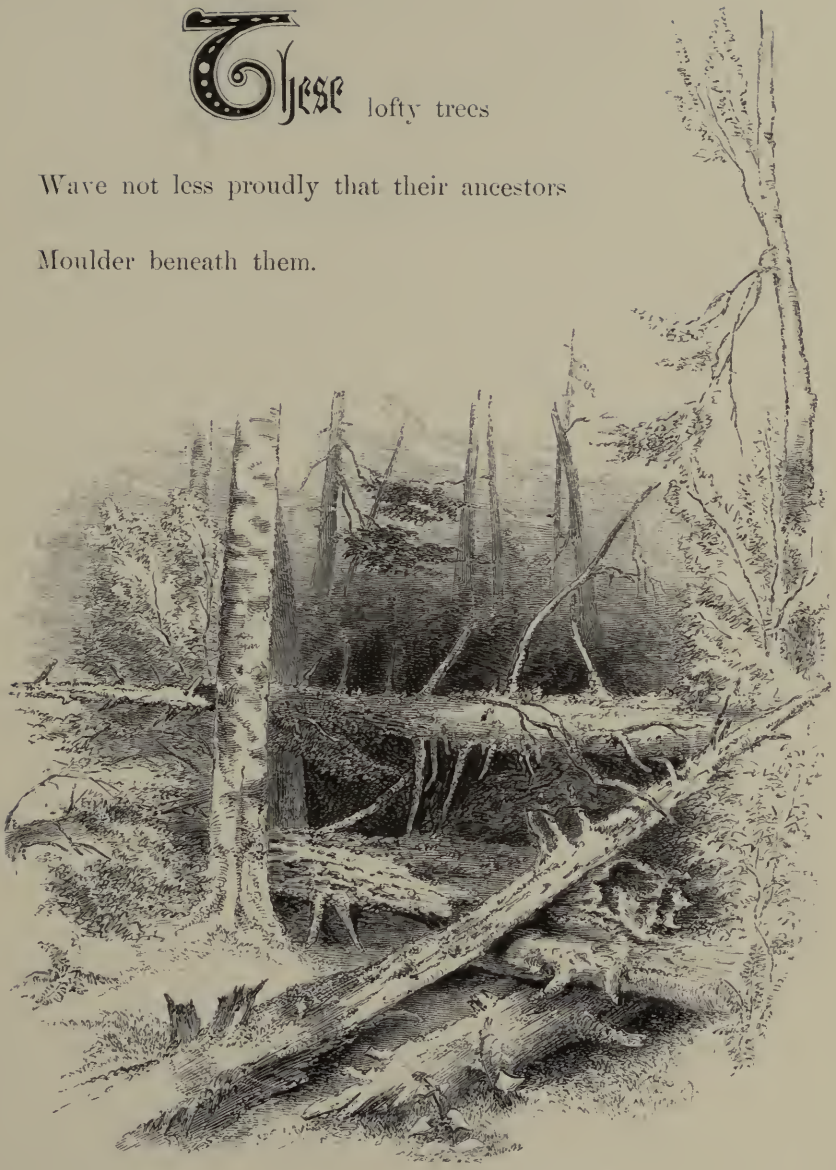
Lo! all grow old and
die—but see again,
How on the faltering footsteps of
decay
Youth presses—ever gay and beau-
tiful youth
In all its beautiful forms.



These lofty trees

Wave not less proudly that their ancestors

Moulder beneath them.



O, there is not lost
One of earth's charms: upon her
bosom yet,
After the flight of untold cen-
turies,
The freshness of her far beginning
lies
And yet shall lie.

Life mocks the idle hate

Of his arch-enemy Death—yea, seats himself

Upon the tyrant's throne—the sepulchre,

And of the triumphs of his ghastly foe

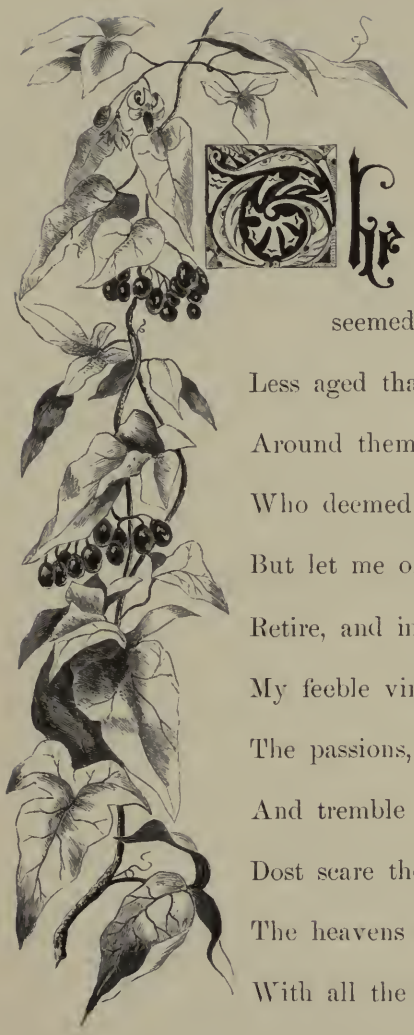
Makes his own nourishment. For he came forth

From thine own bosom, and shall have no end.

There have been holy men who hid themselves

Deep in the woody wilderness, and gave

Their lives to thought and prayer, till they outlived



generation born with them, nor seemed

Less aged than the hoary trees and rocks

Around them;—and there have been holy men

Who deemed it were not well to pass life thus.

But let me often to these solitudes

Retire, and in thy presence reassure

My feeble virtue. Here its enemies,

The passions, at thy plainer footsteps shrink

And tremble and are still. Oh, God! when thou

Dost scare the world with tempests, set on fire

The heavens with falling thunderbolts, or fill,

With all the waters of the firmament,

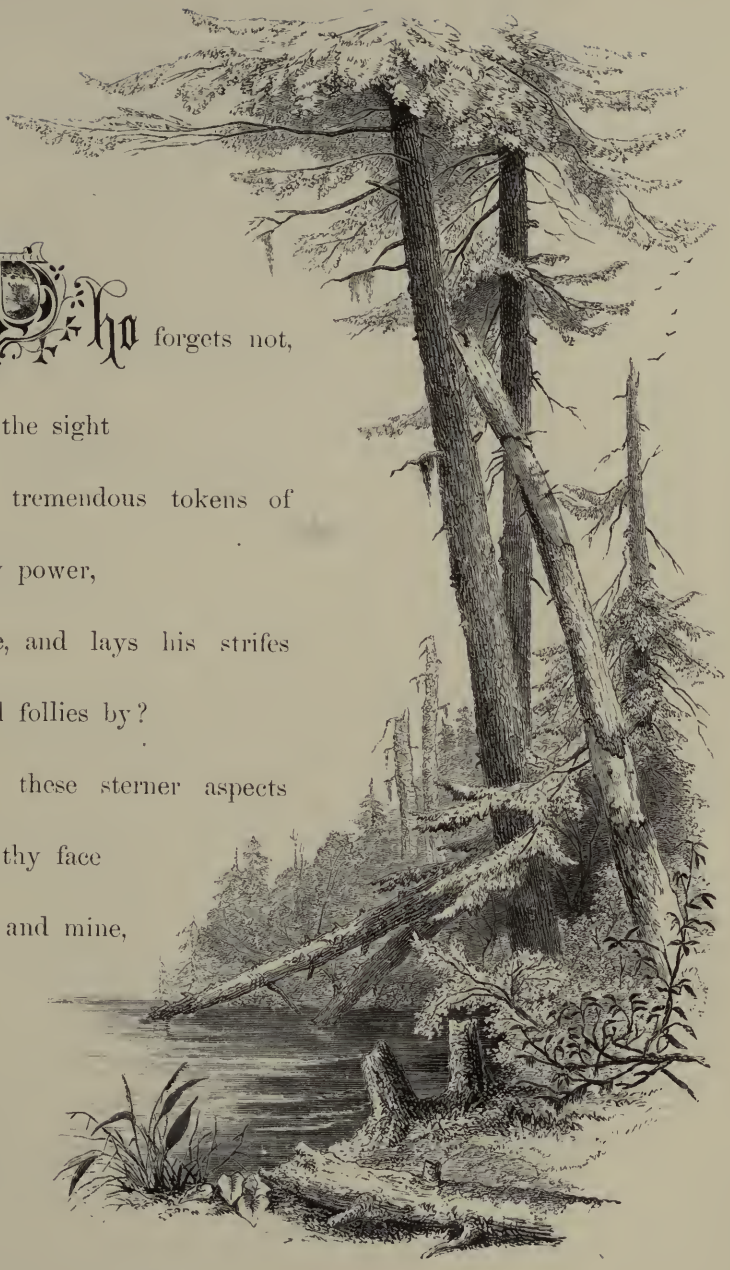
The swift dark whirlwind that uproots the woods

And drowns the villages; when, at thy call,

Uprises the great deep, and throws himself

Upon the continent, and overwhelms

Its cities—



Who forgets not,
at the sight
Of these tremendous tokens of
thy power,
His pride, and lays his strifes
and follies by?
Oh, from these sterner aspects
Of thy face
Spare me and mine,

Or let us need the wrath

Of the mad unchained elements to teach

Who rules them. Be it ours to meditate,

In these calm shades, thy milder majesty,

And to the beautiful order of thy works

Learn to conform the order of our lives.

FOREST HYMN